



# OPEN LEARNING: TRENDS, QUALITY AND CHALLENGES IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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## ABSTRACT

India is a land of great diversity with students coming from different socio-economic backgrounds. Open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly mounting fields of education, and its prospective impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through new developments in information and communication technologies. It is a new paradigm that opens up opportunities for sharing ideas, collaborating between people locally and in varied locations, and facilitating more meaningful engagement in learning. Open and distance learning has existed for about one hundred years in the more developed regions and for one or two generations in the developing regions. Major changes have occurred in the world economy, in particular with regard to the information-bearing technologies. These demand the attention of governments for education and for human resource development. One of the technological trends is the emergence of new forms of distance learning based on more interactive telecommunication technologies, with pedagogical, economic and organizational implications. Hence this paper intends to appraise the concept, history, trends, quality and the challenges of open and distance learning in the global context.

**KEYWORDS:** Open and Distance Learning, Open Learning Trends, Quality assurance, Global Challenges.

## INTRODUCTION:

The last two decades have seen extensive growth in education and training. But the world still suffers from intolerable inequalities at the international level and sometimes within nations. Many countries still suffer from limited access and high dropout rates. Many countries are also struggling with limited access to education and training for children and young people, low or insufficient quality is a major concern, and relevance is another serious problem. Rapid changes in the workforce, unemployment and uncertainty now demand lifelong education. Linked to most of these problems is the problem of financing education according to present and future needs. Lack of resources in developing countries is obvious, and at the same time demographic trends increase the need to expand educational provision.

Today there is much increasing appreciation of the place and role of open and distance learning as an element in any national system of education and training. Some of the potential roles are seen as: balancing inequalities between age groups, extending geographical access to education, dealing with educational campaigns and regular education for large audiences, providing speedy and efficient training for key target groups, providing education for otherwise neglected populations, expanding the capacity for education in new and multi-disciplinary subject areas, offering the combination of education with work and family life, developing multiple competencies through recurrent and continuing education, enhancing the international dimension of educational experience, and improving the quality of existing education services (Rumble, 1989; Ljosa, 1992).

## What is an Open and Distance Learning?

Open and Distance Learning (ODL), formerly known as Distance Education (DE) is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education in recent time. It is a new paradigm that opens up opportunities for sharing ideas, collaborating between people locally and in varied locations, and facilitating more meaningful engagement in learning.

The terms 'open learning' and 'distance education' according to the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organizations, UNESCO (2000) represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and group of learners. It is approaching acceptance within mainstream education and training in such a way that it will make up part of the repertoire of most educational institutions in the future.

The other term, 'open', has many meanings, and the notion of most of them seemed generous and 'charismatic'-open-handed, open-ended, open-hearted, open house, open choice. 'Open' as contrasted with 'closed' carried suggestions of the lessening or removal of restrictions, of exclusions and of privilege; of demolishing or lowering established barriers between subject areas; of enlarging and enriching the areas of activity and experience graded as educational. It symbolized a shift in the relationship between teacher and pupil towards that of student and adviser.

It combines learning innovations and learning quality to achieve a balanced and appropriate solution modified to the given learning objectives, needs and situations. It establishes the thought of Creative Classrooms where teachers are continuously changing their roles according to the scenarios and students are coop-

erating, throughout developing a system of communities across the world.

## The History And Evolution Of Open And Distance Education:

DE has been an increasing way in to education, a reality that has compelled many countries to adopt DE as part of their educational system (Garrison, 1993). Further, this paradigm of 'access to education' is in line with the belief of student autonomy and independence, as students studying at a distance often do so alone (Moore, 1993).

In India ODL was introduced in its most primitive form as correspondence education in the 1960s. Over five decades it has evolved and taken on different forms from corresponding education in the 1960s and 70s to Open and Distance Education in the 1980s, and Virtual Education and Online Education in the last decade. In fact, all three generations of ODL are co-existing in the form of Correspondence Course Institutes/Directorates of Distance Education attached to conventional Universities; State Open Universities; National Open University; Professional Associations; Private Universities and Institutions and Foreign Universities.

The dynamics of globalization, and the beginning of information and communication technologies (ICT), resulted in a tidal nod of information that has, in many cases, overwhelmed many countries around the world in the last few decades and this has resulted in comprehensive changes in the educational needs of individuals and society at large. This resulted to significant increases in different forms of education remarkably;

- Distance Education programs that are delivered through satellites, computers, correspondence or other technological means across all over the country
- Provision are made where degree is gained through study in more than one country that offers joint programs
- Study abroad semester or credit earning provision similar to the twinning programs
- Satellite campuses are set up by an institution in another country to provide its educational programs to foreign students
- Sale of proprietary materials such as books, courseware or testing, together with associated services
- Franchised operations using a third party to give degree – for example a computer company delivering a university computer science degree
- Partnerships for overseas offerings where an institution A in one country enters into a collaborative arrangement with an institution B in another country to provide one or more of its programs to students in B's country
- Corporate Universities
- Virtual Universities

**Open Learning Trends:**

Open and distance learning is going to be an important element of future education and training systems. It is approaching approval within mainstream education in such a way that it will make up part of the collection of most educational institutions in the future. Which means that the present division between 'conventional' education and open and distance learning will become less meaningful. One of the technological trends is the emergence of new forms of distance learning based on more interactive telecommunication technologies, with pedagogical, economic and organizational implications.

Furthermore, there is a significant trend towards internationalization. In recent years Institutional and inter-governmental cooperation is also increasing, and the 'global classroom' has been realized in quite a number of projects, particularly in association with emerging global communication networks.

In industrialized countries present trends are linked both to structural problems of education in modern society, and to technological development. Information and communication technologies in the present days have put on a great probable impact on education, and may help in creating new patterns of education and training. Moreover the Governments, industries and educational institutions are devoted to develop proficient applications of new technologies and at the same time meet the needs of learners. However, conventional ways of teaching keep up to succeed, and it shows a great variety of approaches to the accomplishment of new strategies, with varying success.

**Quality Assurance to Open Learning:**

The concept of quality is often very difficult to define and has remained rather elusive especially in the context of Higher education where institutions have broad autonomy to decide on their own visions and missions. Quality assurance is a planned and systematic review process of an institution or and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced. It is a process directed toward achieving that characteristic.

According to Mackoww and Witkoski (2005) quality assurance could be regarded as a useful method for improvement, modernization and internationalization of higher education through a procedure to assure and improve the quality of provision as it ensures the quality of academic (teaching-learning process and curriculum) and structural (building and physical facilities) provisions of courses and allow for an objective review of their quality. Since the 1990s, quality assurance in distance and higher education has gained serious attention by institutions, stakeholders, and scholars.

The purpose of quality assurance is to ensure consistency of services and products, and reliability in their delivery and quality (a reduction of variability and unpredictability). It aims to make processes and procedures transparent to the people using them (reducing uncertainty in staff), and to avoid errors as a consequence. It can facilitate the three things identified by Daniel as essential for managing distance education: communication, coordination and careful attention to detail.

Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is becoming increasingly imperative due to the large-scale expansion in modes of educational delivery. Learning quality cannot pre-defined but have to be modified to the given situation and learners. But it is obvious that educational change through Open Learning and refined pedagogies is enormously important to attain the highest learning quality possible. Quality has always been an issue in distance education (DE) and distance learning (DL).

Many quality assurance agencies have responded to this need and there is extensive dialogue about ensuring quality in distance education. Learners are demanding enhanced quality educational services and supplies. This means ODL providers must pay close attention to quality in terms of products, processes, production, delivery systems, and philosophy (COL, 1997). The 'total quality approach,' which covers not only products but services and processes as well, is a very useful methodology that holistically examines the process of ODL as an integrated whole (Zuhairi, Purwanto & Isman, 2002).

Quality development becomes imperative for ODL providers, and governments have recognized quality agencies to improve the quality of educational practice. Pressures for quality improvement have emerged from both internal and external parties. Internally, ODL institutions are being challenged to undertake continuous improvement from within. Externally, stakeholders (i.e., users, consumers, educational funders) are persistently questioning the quality, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency of educational activities in which they have interest. Moreover, for many ODL institutions funding and student enrollment levels depend on quality of their base line presentation and the quality of the services they offer.

QA is not an attempt to create quality, but rather a systematic and comprehensive effort to improve quality. QA, therefore, is not a means to achieve particular target and develop procedures, but rather a continuous process of enhancement. QA is based on the supposition that quality can be improved endlessly. All institutions providing ODL will have some existing systems and procedures for ensuring the quality of what they do. Clearly, quality in ODL covers a number of

aspects, which along with the physical products, includes pedagogical processes, production and delivery systems, and philosophy (COL, 1997).

Implementation of QA implies change of work culture of staff at all levels. Everyone in the organization must think about – and more importantly, do something – to effect quality improvements in every step of their work activities. In theory, drafting organizational change and improvement could be easy (Daft, 2006). The quality of open and distance learning (ODL) varies, like any other form of education. Its quality however can be the product of a variety of factors, both internal and external to an ODL organization for example, the levels of skills and expertise of staff, the amount of resources available, weak or strong leadership, competence of its administrative systems, or the communications infrastructure in a country.

Quality assurance procedures need to be developed in a way that leaves scope for individual initiative and professional judgment while it still achieve a baseline of consistency in standards of practice.

**Global Challenges and Barriers to Open Learning:**

Open Learning tries to provide an answer on the given challenges of globalization for the modernization of learning, education and training. The best appropriate learning quality remains the core objective in learning, education and training and can be achieved by combining the three dimensions learning history, learning innovations and learning standards.

The challenge for ODL institution, therefore, is not only to ensure learner support that is both accessible and relevant, but also to encourage students to participate in and use of support systems that ensure quality-learning. Management and decision-making processes are similarly difficult to assess. Indeed, it takes some time to observe how the quality of 'decision-making' influences a given institution (COL, 1997).

ODL in higher education institutions is under increasing pressure to meet students' demand for flexibility, as students have progressively more diverse background and needs. To meet this challenge, innovation is essential. Innovation in ODL assumes that new techniques will help individual institutions achieve their aims in terms of concrete access, cost, quality, and flexibility (Daniel, 1999). In this context, technology becomes a crucial means in ODL. For technology-based universities, particularly open universities, the quality of teaching and learning is of critical importance, as ODL materials are open to public access and scrutiny, and when the use of information and communication technology is involved, such access can often become global (Bates, 2000). Components of quality in technology-based educational materials include content, media production, instructional design, and delivery and student support (Bates, 2000).

In developing countries there are some common barriers to the effective implementation of open and distance learning. Lack of funding, problems of allocation of resources and sustained support are possibly the most important ones, having decisive effects on quality and achievement. Lack of human resources with sufficient competence and motivation is another problem. The third and the major problem is technological infrastructure, which prevents the effective use of appropriate technologies. Lack of infrastructure and professional competence in open and distance learning are important barriers. And lastly lack of strategic planning and coordination which may reduce the level of achievement.

The strategies for future development should include coordination of goals, policy clarification and coordination at national level, as well as regional coordination and collaboration. Capacity building is another most important one which includes increased professionalism in planning and management of open and distance learning systems. Other aspects such as networking between national stakeholders, better integration between education and training systems is the need.

The following challenges are being faced by the developing countries:

1. **Cost Effectiveness:** The challenge here concerns the production and delivery of the course, module or unit. Are they cost effective? Would it be more cost effective to buy in a course, direct students elsewhere or work in partnership with other organisations to achieve economies of scale?
2. **Appropriate Media:** Majority of open and distance learning environments make use of an array of audio, video and textual material, in a variety of ways in teaching. The issue now is what criteria do they adopt in determining the most appropriate media for our needs and how do we deploy these in an ODL context. Furthermore, how can institutions make use of the powerful interactive features of Communications and Information Technology to achieve best results?
3. **Support and Retention:** The challenge of widening participation, bring adults and disadvantaged groups into the university, is with us. How can we best support our students and improve retention and what diagnostic / developmental materials will be needed?
4. **Training of Staff and Technical Support:** The shift from being a conventional, face-to-face teacher, to an online facilitator is not easy. What mea-

asures should be put in place to train open and distance education lecturers? What briefing and training should be provided to transform lecturers into e-Moderators or e-experts? Furthermore, with an increase in part-time students, or full time students who work part time, the need for technical support is highly important. What provision should be made for technical support for students during evenings, weekends and other time zones?

5. **Procedures for Testing Students:** According to Wellar (2000), in a conventional teaching situation the demeanour of students, quizzical looks and raised hands often signify a problem in communication or understanding. However, in an ODL context this is more difficult – especially if the tutor never sees the student and is separated in time and space! What procedures should be put in place to test or trial test actual materials, systems and procedures before a course is offered to students?
6. **Meeting Special Requirements:** The Special Educational Needs Disability Act (2001) requires institutions to be anticipatory to put procedures and practices in place in the expectation that those requiring alternative forms of delivery can gain ready access. How can Open and Learning environments meet the needs of communication impaired students? Furthermore, what systems can be put in place to ensure the various media -audio, video, text etc to ensure that the needs of communication impaired students are taken care of?

Some of the more common problems that need to be taken care of are: inadequate technological infrastructure, planning and programme deficiencies, lack of human capacity and expertise, inadequate financial resources: and lack of recognition of educational equivalence. In these circumstances open and distance learning should be considered more as a complement to and less as a substitute for other approaches.

### CONCLUSION:

Open learning means a more learner-centered approach, allowing greater flexibility and choice of content as well as organization of the learning programme. Consequently, distance learning is seen as a subset of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in time and space from their peers and the instructor. Distance learning needs to be redefined. It may be seen as a subset of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in time and space from their peers and the instructor. For distance education goals to be achieved, proper steps must be taken not only to involve all stakeholders (community leaders, business groups, conventional educational institutions, etc.).

An increasingly used approach to managing quality in education is quality assurance. In transferring these approaches, care needs to be taken in two respects: firstly, not to adopt them uncritically and secondly, to find an adequate balance between their utility and their potential for constriction. It is also important to note that quality assurance can only work when everyone is fully aware and understands what is involved, and that it takes effort and commitment to make 'quality' happen and can only happen when all stakeholders from students and frontline staff, to university leadership and government, has input into the system. Quality assurance implementation also requires shared responsibility of all staff and management. Quality assurance activities must be clear and transparent and, more importantly, they must be achievable and able to meet customer expectations. When quality assurance systems and procedures are clear and activities well defined, it is only then, that open and distance learning institutions will be able to meet high quality standards.

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